



**Senator Feinstein Requests Investigation of  
West Coast Tsunami Preparedness**  
January 10, 2005

**Washington, DC** – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) is asking the Government Accountability Office today to investigate the readiness of coastal communities in the western United States to respond to a large-scale tsunami such as the one that occurred in Asia last month.

The text of the letter is below:

The Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

I am writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) initiate an investigation into the readiness of the coastal areas of the western United States to respond to a large-scale tsunami. I believe that the recent tragedy in Asia provides an important impetus for us to review and evaluate the disaster preparedness systems in these areas, especially in relation to the threat from tsunamis in the Pacific Ocean.

This issue is of particular importance to me as California has historically been susceptible to tsunamis. Since 1800, at least 14 tsunamis with waves six-feet or higher have struck the coast of California, several of which inflicted major destruction. In 1964, an Alaskan tsunami with waves reaching 20 feet struck the coast of California near Crescent City causing \$7.5 million in damages and eleven deaths. Three tsunamis also flooded Santa Barbara during the early 1800s, including one in 1812 that caused widespread devastation.

It is my understanding that through its two warning centers based in Alaska and Hawaii, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is currently able to monitor changes to Pacific Ocean waves using signals from six high-technology buoys and 150 tide gauges. Within a few seconds, this warning system allows the NOAA to identify tsunami waves and send out an alert to potentially-affected communities in Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Hawaii, and California.

Notwithstanding the significant value of the national tsunami warning system, I remain concerned about the ability of states and local communities to respond to the warning information they receive. I am also concerned about the effectiveness of the current warning system to address near-shore tsunamis and tsunamis triggered by coastal landslides.

In light of these outstanding concerns, I believe that it is vital to begin an investigation into the preparedness of the West Coast to respond to a tsunami threat. In this investigation I would ask that the GAO examine the following questions:

- What is the general risk of large-scale tsunamis to the coastal areas of the Western United States including California?
- Is the current NOAA warning system adequately able to alert the coastal areas of the Western United States about a large-scale tsunami?
- In particular, is the current NOAA warning system effectively able to warn against the threat of near-shore tsunamis?
- What areas specifically along the coast of the western United States are most vulnerable to tsunamis?
- Are local governments in these most-threatened areas currently prepared to deal with a tsunami?
- What mitigation measures have been undertaken by both state and local authorities in the coastal areas of the Western United States to address a tsunami threat?
- Do local communities in these areas have a plan to alert residents once they receive a warning from the NOAA?
- Do states and local communities have adequate evacuation plans in place to respond to an incoming tsunami?
- Should tsunami preparedness plans be prioritized to protect ports and essential infrastructure along the coast?
- How prepared are states and local communities to respond to localized tsunamis caused by landslides and submarine slides?
- In what areas can technology be better employed to decrease the threat of tsunamis?

In addition to evaluating the readiness of coastal areas along the western United States to respond to a large-scale tsunami threat, I would ask that the GAO provide recommendations for improving preparedness and mitigation efforts at the national, state, and local levels in this region.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and I look forward to your reply. Please do not hesitate to contact my Chief of Staff, Mark Kadesh, if you have any questions.

Sincerely yours,

Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator

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